

The harlot

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Readers will be familiar with the word picture in Revelation 17 of the harlot sitting on the scarlet-coloured beast. In the light of current developments in Europe, considered in this month's Watchman article, this article looks at the Old Testament background of this symbol.

SYMBOLISM and figurative language are a feature of both the Old and New Testament writings. We usually associate this use with those parts of Scripture that we regard as prophetic, but this is not exclusively so. As a principle of exposition it is wise to establish how symbols and figures of speech are used in the earlier parts of Scripture if we are to understand their later usage. It is on this basis, therefore, that the subject of harlotry as presented in the Old Testament is considered so that we are in a position rightly to expound its symbolic use in the book of Revelation.

Marriage

In Eden God established the state of marriage as being the fellowship and union of one man and one woman. Jesus confirms this when he says: "Have ye not read, that He which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Mt. 19:4-6).

The reason for this arrangement is given by the prophet Malachi in 2:15: "That He might seek a godly seed." That is, the children produced by the natural union of the husband and wife would be brought up in God's ways and so become God's children. Consequently, unfaithfulness in marriage is condemned in the strongest possible terms; adultery was punishable by death under the God-given Law of Moses.

In practice, unfaithfulness occurred, and in the time of Jeremiah it was rife, hence his rebuke in 5:7-9: "How shall I pardon thee for this? thy children have forsaken Me, and sworn by them

that are no gods: when I had fed them to the full, they then committed adultery, and assembled themselves by troops in the harlots' houses. They were as fed horses in the morning: every one neighed after his neighbour's wife. Shall I not visit for these things? saith the LORD: and shall not My soul be avenged on such a nation as this?"

Unfaithfulness

The things recorded above are a description, in straightforward language, of the marriage state and unfaithfulness in marriage. However, marriage is also used in a figurative way to describe the relationship between God and mankind. For instance, in Eden a seed of the woman was promised that would crush the serpent's head. When Cain was born, Eve said, "I have gotten a man from the LORD" (Gen. 4:1), although Adam was the father. She hoped that he would be the 'godly seed.' The record shows that, sadly, this was not so; for Cain proved to be the 'seed of the serpent,' becoming a murderer after the pattern of the serpent whose lies deceived Eve, causing her disobedience and death.

The relationship between God and Israel is later described as a marriage. Jeremiah in 3:20 says: "Surely as a wife treacherously departeth from her husband, so have ye dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel, saith the LORD" (v. 20). The simile makes Israel's spiritual unfaithfulness equivalent to marital unfaithfulness. Later in his prophecy Jeremiah moves from simile to metaphor when he says of Israel, "I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD" (31:32).

Hosea, at God's command, took a wife who became unfaithful: "Go, take unto thee a wife of whoredoms and children of whoredoms: for the land hath committed great whoredom, departing from the LORD" (Hos. 1:2); and, "Then said the LORD unto me, Go yet, love a woman beloved of her friend, yet an adulteress, according to the love of the LORD toward the children of Israel, who look to other gods, and love flagons of wine" (3:1). The marriage of Hosea to Gomer is a symbol for

Table 1 Features of Ezekiel 16

Verse	Detail	Notes
2	Jerusalem	The people
5,6	Rescued when an unwanted baby	Acts 7:19,25
8	Grown up—married to God	Ex. 19:4-6; Jer. 7:22,23
15-25	Practices as a harlot	Judg. 2:17
26	With Egypt	1 Kgs. 3:1
28	With Assyria	2 Kgs. 16:7
29	With Chaldeans	
37,38	Judged by lovers	
40	'Killed'	
45-56	Has two sisters, Sodom (younger) and Samaria (elder)	
60-63	Redeemed/ forgiven/purged/reunited with God	

the relationship between God and Israel. Israel spiritually has become first an adulteress and finally a harlot, just like Gomer, Hosea's wife.

Harlots

There are two chapters in Ezekiel's prophecy that develop the symbol of the harlot. They are chapters 16 and 23.

Chapter 16 traces the development of Jerusalem—not, of course, the physical structure of the city but the people whose capital city is Jerusalem. Their development from an unwanted baby through puberty to a beautiful woman, whom God takes as a wife, is detailed in verses 1 to 13. From that point their profligate behaviour fills the other 63 verses. The key points are given in [Table](#)

[1](#) above. Since the picture in this chapter focuses on Jerusalem it may be concluded that God is looking at the history of the nation associated with the Davidic line, whose kings were resident in Jerusalem until the carrying away to Babylon. The mention of two other sisters, one of whom is Samaria, supports this conclusion.

Chapter 23 looks at the nation from the perspective of the two-tribe and ten-tribe kingdoms, although their origins predate that actual division. The key points are given in [Table 2](#) below.

How the nation became a harlot

But what actually was the whoredom that the prophet describes so graphically in these two chapters? It was that the people made alliances

Table 2 Features of Ezekiel 23

Verse	Detail	Notes
1,2	Two women from the same mother	
3	Whoredom in Egypt in their youth	Ezek. 20:7,8
4	Aholah (Samaria) the elder	
4	Aholibah (Jerusalem) the younger	
5-8	Aholah has Assyrian lovers	2 Kgs. 15:19
9,10	Assyrian lovers execute judgements on Aholah	2 Kgs. 17:6
11,12	Aholibah has Assyrian lovers	2 Kgs. 16:11,17
14-21	Aholibah has Babylonian lovers	2 Kgs. 24:1
22-26	Babylonians and others execute judgements on Aholibah	2 Kgs. 24:11; 25:1

with the nations around them, which God had specifically warned them not to do (see Deut. 7:2-4).

Examples of such alliances abound throughout the time of the judges and the kings. For instance: “the children of Israel dwelt among the Canaanites, Hittites, and Amorites, and Perizzites, and Hivites, and Jebusites: and they took their daughters to be their wives, and gave their daughters to their sons, and served their gods. And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and forgot the LORD their God, and served Baalim and the groves” (Judg. 3:5-7).

Of Ahab it is recorded:

“And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Zidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him” (1 Kgs. 16:31).

Similarly, of Ahaz it is recorded:

“So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, saying, I am thy servant and thy son: come up, and save me out of the hand of the king of Syria, and out of the hand of the king of Israel, which rise up against me. And Ahaz took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the LORD, and in the treasures of the king’s house, and sent it for a present to the king of Assyria” (2 Kgs. 16:7,8).

As a consequence the people of God adopted the culture, the ideas and the false gods of the surrounding nations, including, among other things, child sacrifice—alluded to in Ezekiel 16:21 (see too Ps. 106:35-39). The intended godly seed was thus destroyed, or corrupted from godly ways. The literal child sacrifice also becomes a symbol of the persecution and killing of the faithful remnant—this is implicit, for example, in Elijah’s plea to God: “And he said, I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts: because the children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, thrown down Thine altars, and slain Thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away” (1 Kgs. 19:14).

Those nations that initially were allies often became oppressors and then stripped the nation of its assets. This is illustrated by the divine comment on the reign of Ahaz: “For the LORD brought Judah low because of Ahaz king of Israel; for he made Judah naked, and transgressed sore against the LORD. And Tilgath-pilneser king of Assyria came unto him, and distressed him, but

strengthened him not” (2 Chron. 28:19,20).

It should be noted that in the symbol of the harlot there is no separation between the religious arrangements and the secular arrangements; that is, there is no distinction between ‘church’ and ‘state.’ The people as a whole have a relationship with God that was meant to find its expression in the way the nation operated on a daily basis, both within their territory and with their neighbours. The religious arrangements that God appointed, if faithfully observed, would have supported right national behaviour.

Summary

What, then, are the ideas contained within the symbol of the harlot as expounded by Ezekiel?

- the symbol relates to a group of people ‘married’ to God to bring forth a ‘godly seed’
- this group has made alliances with ungodly worldly rulers, who provide prosperity and indulgence now
- they become oppressors of the faithful remnant
- they will be judged through their lovers—that is, through their rulers, who take away their assets and freedoms.

On this basis, when we come to Revelation 17 we ought not to see the harlot simply as a religious organisation. It should be remembered that dictators in the past have used the established religious systems to impose control. Nebuchadnezzar is an example who required worship of his golden image and sentenced objectors to death. The harlot will be a people who once were faithful but have become apostate.

The people who became a people for God after the ministry of Jesus were predominantly Gentiles, who were distributed throughout the world encompassed by the territories of Nebuchadnezzar’s image. They accepted Christianity and as such were God’s people. But, like Israel before them, they rapidly lapsed into false worship by incorporating pagan ideas into their worship and behaviour, and thus for the most part became a harlot. This is the position today, where the Christian world is intoxicated with the philosophies of men, involved in politics and becoming increasingly intolerant of the truth of the gospel.

Such a world is ripe for judgement, but much of it will come at the hands of the rulers who shape the policies of the nations, albeit under divine supervision. Perhaps we are seeing the beginning of just such a process, which we explore in this month’s Watchman article on page 15.